Reimagining African Narratives: Amílcar Cabral's revolutionary contributions

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Amílcar Cabral's legacy transcends conventional African narratives, embodying a profound challenge to established paradigms. Through his revolutionary contributions, Cabral not only reshaped the discourse surrounding African liberation but also sparked a transformative shift in our understanding of identity, resistance, and postcolonial transformation. His insights into the complexities of national liberation and his emphasis on culture as a catalyst for change continue to inspire scholars and activists alike to reimagine Africa's past, present, and future.

Keywords: legacy, revolutionary, identity, liberation, resistance, Pan-Africanism

Reimaginando as narrativas africanas: as contribuições revolucionárias de Amílcar Cabral

O legado de Amílcar Cabral transcende as narrativas africanas convencionais, representando um profundo desafio aos paradigmas estabelecidos. Através das suas contribuições revolucionárias, Cabral não só reformulou o discurso à volta da libertação africana, mas também provocou uma mudança transformadora na nossa compreensão da identidade, resistência e transformação pós-colonial. As suas perceções das complexidades da libertação nacional e a sua ênfase na cultura como um catalisador da mudança continuam a inspirar académicos e ativistas a reimaginar o passado, o presente e o futuro de África.

Palavras-chave: legado, revolucionário, identidade, libertação, resistência, pan-africanismo

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Early life and intellectual influences

Amílcar Cabral's path to becoming a prominent figure in African history was not just a series of events, but a deeply personal journey. His early life experiences, intellectual curiosity, and exposure to diverse ideological currents shaped him into the leader he became. Born into a middle-class family on September 12, 1924, in Bafatá, Guinea-Bissau, Cabral's upbringing was deeply influenced by the socio-political realities of Portuguese colonial rule, which was characterised by oppressive policies, economic exploitation, and cultural assimilation. His parents, Juvenal António Lopes da Costa Cabral and Iva Pinhel Évora, instilled in him a strong sense of African heritage and a fervent desire for justice and liberation.

Despite colonialism's constraints, Cabral's childhood instilled in him a profound awareness of the exploitation and oppression endured by African peoples under Portuguese rule. His education, primarily received at home and colonial schools in Cape Verde, fostered his academic excellence and cultivated his interest in literature, history, and philosophy. However, it was during his agronomy studies in Lisbon, Portugal, in the late 1940s that Cabral's radical political consciousness was truly awakened.

As a university student in Lisbon, Cabral was immersed in a vibrant intellectual environment. He engaged in impassioned debates on colonialism, imperialism, and the struggle for independence, and actively participated in student politics. It was during this time that he encountered Marxist thought and revolutionary ideas, which would profoundly shape his ideological perspective and influence his future contributions to the African liberation movement.

During Cabral's formative years, the intellectual milieu in Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau fostered a burgeoning anti-colonial consciousness and a nascent sense of African identity. Despite the oppressive nature of Portuguese colonial rule, Cabral and his contemporaries belonged to a generation of African intellec-

tuals committed to challenging the status quo and envisioning a future free from colonial oppression. He would gain valuable practical experience in organising and participating in clandestine life-threatening activities against the fascist dictatorship in Portugal.

In addition to Marxist thought, Cabral was inspired by Pan-Africanist ideals, which emphasised the unity and solidarity of African peoples in their struggle against imperialism and white supremacy. Drawing inspiration from Pan-Africanist leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Kwame Nkrumah (Adebajo, 2020; Lopes, 2010; Mendy, 2019; Rashid, 2019), Cabral advocated for the emancipation and empowerment of African peoples for the ultimate unification of their nations liberated beyond "flag independence".

Cabral's exposure to Marxist thought and Pan-Africanist ideals informed his political outlook and shaped his approach to organising resistance against colonial rule. He recognised the interconnectedness of struggles for national liberation across Africa and viewed Marxism and Pan-Africanism as ideological frameworks to guide the African liberation movement towards its objectives. These theoretical contributions continue to resonate in contemporary debates on African history and liberation movements.

Relevance for contemporary debates

Cabral understood that the fundamental parameters of the national liberation struggle were political. That victory could only be achieved if liberation movements first formulated political positions, which would then justify military action. These positions should be anchored on a solid ideological base for revolutionary action, the absence of which he considered a critical weakness in the struggles against imperialism. One considers such an expression to reflect the imperativeness of revolutionary theory that reflects local context and practice. It is interesting to recall this because contemporary guerrilla movements often begin with religious proclamations or massacres to intimidate and instil fear.

On the other hand, Cabral developed the idea that the liberation struggle was an act of culture (Cabral, 1979 and 2023; Lopes, 2010; Mendy, 2019). It was a struggle against colonial domination and exploitation energised by cultural oppression and alienation to regain dignity and freedom. He introduced a series of innovations that earned him recognition as a central figure in the pan-African formulations of the time, engaging in the construction of the tricontinental ideology that advocated for the unity of the struggles of the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America against imperialism, the precursor to what is now called the

Global South. Cabral was also involved in building a new consciousness in the Portuguese-speaking world of the time, including the liberation struggles in the Portuguese colonies and Portugal – culminating in the fall of the fascist regime in April 1974.

However, Cabral was assassinated before the independence of Guinea-Bissau was proclaimed on September 24, 1973. On April 25, 1974, the Carnation Revolution paved the way for the independence of all remaining Portuguese colonies.

The relevance of studying Amílcar Cabral today

In a turbulent world, the recourse to the wisdom of role models becomes even more urgent.

When recalling the teachings of Amílcar Cabral, we realise how the global is so profoundly local. We hear about his personality in terms of posture, behaviour, leadership, and charisma. This is evident in the videos, photos, and audio recordings that captured the man, in the analyses that many observers have provided, and even in the findings of a BBC survey that recognised him as among the most influential figures in the history of the world (BBC, 2020). However, it is primarily through reading his writings that young people today can absorb the intricacy of his character and personality.

Cabral was not merely a poet; he was a visionary. Cabral was not just a guerrilla leader; he was an organiser. Cabral was not just a diplomat; he was a mobiliser. Cabral was not just a leader; he embodied visionary leadership. Cabral was not just a teacher; he was a charismatic pedagogue. These are not only too many qualities for one person; they are the hallmarks of a truly exceptional individual. Despite his human flaws, Cabral's unique qualities and indelible mark on history inspire and give hope to many.

In difficult times, we look to the rear-view mirror, a natural reaction for those scrutinising the future without clear benchmarks and controlled speed. The past seems more straightforward to interpret, although it was not necessarily easier to live or face. After all, what could be more challenging to change today than what Cabral experienced in his youth?

To lead a grassroots movement from the ground up, in a marginalised territory, against an army that once boasted over 20,000 troops on the frontlines, equipped with formidable aerial resources, NATO logistics, and diplomatic backing from influential nations; to achieve a momentous victory by charting the course to the liberation of Guinea and Cape Verde, igniting the consolidation of the liberation movement in Angola, sparking a revolt that ultimately eradicated

fascism in Portugal, and sparking a new wave of Pan-Africanist and revolutionary thought, are indeed remarkable achievements.

In addition to being an outstanding organiser, Cabral made significant theoretical contributions.

Examples include his conceptualisation of the role of culture in liberation, later expanded upon in Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 1983); the transformation of the Marxist reading of class struggle into a configuration of how a subjugated people embody a national class in their fight against colonialism, a more sophisticated thesis than the simplistic version of Kwame Nkrumah; the metaphorical interpretation of the ambiguous role of the petty bourgeoisie, or today's elites, in the postcolonial period, subjects of perpetuating alienated practices, as Frantz Fanon developed in psychological terms (Fanon, 1961); or the elaboration of a new concept of unity, only achievable through the sublimation of what he called revolutionary practice, i.e., a stance for the movements of his time, distinct from the cheap populisms on which many present-day protesters rely (Cabral, 1979).

All this was done while speaking to peasants with the same ease as addressing global audiences. For some, he used examples from their simple daily lives – pots, land, homes, or forests – and for others, he offered the popular wisdom of African proverbs and riddles as a point of connection with that same reality.

Cabral's words were magical. Cabral used comparisons and metaphors and demonstrated respect for others, not distinguishing in terms of degree, gender, or race, as we are now accustomed to.

Cabral's significance lies in his unwavering fight against society's tendency to use an aura of mystery to ensure the erasure of heroes. His words are worth quoting:

> During the lives of great revolutionaries, the oppressive classes subject them to endless persecution [...] After their death, they attempt to transform them into harmless icons, surrounding their names with an aura to "comfort" the oppressed classes or nations and mystify them. In doing so, they dilute and devalue the revolutionary doctrine, destroying its strength. (Cabral, 1979)

Indeed, such incisive observation would apply to Cabral himself, who was diabolised by colonialists as a "terrorist" and reclaimed as a genius strategist after his assassination. He was heroised, banalised, and largely dismissed in his own land of birth. Nevertheless, his extraordinary achievements and critically acclaimed intellectual contributions are celebrated and memorialised and remain an enduring source of inspiration in Africa and beyond.

Indeed, Cabral is associated with a victorious liberation struggle, innovative guerrilla tactics, effective participatory governance structures in liberated areas, and a significant intellectual contribution. Cabral never opted for the easy path. His effective leadership envisioned the development of a post-independence just society from the bottom, with the fulfilment of widespread expectations that include the establishment of a functioning democracy characterised by meaningful participation in decisions affecting lives and livelihoods, transparency, accountability, and responsiveness of officeholders to the people; and empowerment to escape the vicious circle of poverty, hunger, disease, and ignorance. With a commitment to dismantle patriarchy and empower women to realise their potential, national development is complete. Many observers worldwide thought such a vision would hold new prospects for development in Africa.

Basil Davidson viewed the emergence of independent countries as a necessary evolution in Africa's history, reclaiming self-mastery and thus capable, with time and effort, of moving forward to become a genuine postcolonial society (Davidson,1969).

Cabral emphasised the importance of time and effort, firmly convinced that a mere continuation of the colonial legacy, whether in political, economic, or cultural realms, would be disastrous. With a similar level of awareness and respect for his legacy, it is essential to present arguments that contribute to a deeper understanding of how Cabral embraced and helped shape the Pan-Africanist ideal without seeking personal credit or protagonism (Aid & Sherwood, 2003).

Pan-Africanism as an ideology

According to Thandika Mkandawire, the relationship between African intellectuals, Pan-Africanism, and nationalism is symbiotic and contradictory (Mkandawire, 2005).

Ali Mazrui adds that while one can imagine African intellectualism without Pan-Africanism, the opposite is impossible. Joseph Ki-Zerbo also states that African nationalism has always been influenced by Pan-Africanist concepts; without them, it would be meaningless (Aid & Sherwood, 2003).

Ki-Zerbo further argues that Pan-Africanism would be absurd without the dimension of national liberation. Hence, it is impossible to discuss Pan-Africanism without acknowledging the intellectuals who conceived it, as they are the driving force behind the political formulation that led to nationalism and national liberation (Devés-Valdés, 2008).

Henry Sylvester Williams from Trinidad first outlined Pan-Africanism, aiming to defend black people worldwide against abuse and exploitation. W.E.B. Du

Bois from the USA later revisited the idea, incorporating the question of rights (Adebajo, 2020; Aid & Sherwood, 2003).

When George Padmore from Trinidad and Kwame Nkrumah from the Gold Coast/Ghana joined Du Bois and Jomo Kenyatta from Kenya and Dudley Thompson from Jamaica, they jointly planned and organised the Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester, England, in 1945. The congress centred on the urgency of African independence. Nkrumah himself went through various phases of political evolution in his thoughts on Pan-Africanism and later organised the first meeting of Pan-Africanists on African soil, the All-African People's Conference, in Accra, Ghana, in 1958. An essential outcome of this gathering, attended by Amilcar Cabral, Patrice Lumumba, and leaders of many independence movements in Africa, was the decision to institutionalise the Pan-African movement with the creation of an organisation headquartered in the continent (Adebajo, 2020; Aid & Sherwood, 2003; Hallen, 2002; Lopes, 2008).

The establishment of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) on May 25, 1963, celebrated as "Africa Day" in independent African countries and the African diaspora during Nkrumah's presidency in Ghana, marked the birth of a more pragmatic and less idealistic notion of Pan-Africanism despite its fundamental objective of complete continental integration. The debate between Du Bois' and Marcus Garvey's visions still polarises, with some advocating for rights and others emphasising struggle (Adebajo, 2020; Devés-Valdés, 2008).

For the young Africans who gathered in Lisbon at the Center for African Studies, committed to the "re-Africanisation of their spirits" and pursuing the aspirations of the Manchester Congress, influences extended beyond the Anglophone protagonists and the cultural movement of the Harlem Renaissance. Amílcar Cabral and his companions read Jorge Amado and Brazilian social literature, encountered socialist thinking published in Brazil, and discovered the magazine *Présence Africaine* and its propagation of Negritude and Black poetry (Lopes, 2008; Mendy, 2019).

In the Francophone milieu, the polarising debate centred around Léopold Sédar Senghor, who promoted a Pan-African ideal based on ideas, culture, and aesthetics, highlighting that Negritude is a value that integrates a universal whole and without which Pan-Africanism would lack meaning or coherence (Lopes, 2008).

In 1947, Alioune Diop from Senegal created *Présence Africaine* in Paris. Six years later, Mário de Andrade, who gravitated around the *Casa dos Estudantes do Império* in Lisbon, connected with Alioune Diop in the search for networking rather than employment. Later, Andrade became Diop's secretary and organised

the first Congress of Black Writers and Artists, which took place in Paris in 1956, followed by the gathering in Rome in 1959 (Lopes, 2008).

The struggles for independence began taking shape, with Ghana, Kenya, and Sékou Touré's Guinea standing out. However, the Algerian FLN had the most significant influence. All these movements referenced Pan-Africanism, although clear divisions later emerged during the creation of the OAU, with moderate factions in the Monrovia group and more radical ones in the Casablanca group.

Amílcar Cabral expanded his influence beyond Guinea and Cape Verde during his mobilisation. He was instrumental in creating the African Revolutionary Front for Independence (FRAIN) and the Conference of Nationalist Organisations of the Portuguese Colonies (CONCP). Mário de Andrade led both organisations' objectives and intellectual work, providing accurate structures for their Pan-Africanist ideals (Mendy, 2019).

Amílcar Cabral emerged as an essential intellectual figure in the 1960s, contributing to the ideological framework of Pan-Africanism. His interpretation separated Pan-Africanism from its racial aspect. Initially, Pan-Africanism struggled with two contrasting domains: geography and race, the continent or the black personality.

The concept's genesis was formed by a diaspora disconnected from its African roots, which significantly emphasised the racial factor as a common denominator for Pan-African goals. In the United States and the Caribbean, power distribution always favoured *jus sanguinis* (right of blood) over *jus solis* (right of soil).

According to Edward Said, "the mind needs order, achieved by registering and distinguishing everything, placing all conscious thoughts in a secure and easily accessible space, thereby giving things a role in the economy of objects and identity that constitutes an environment" (Said, 2004).

Abstract constructions such as race and geography are human creations that enable the definition of differences – "us" versus "them". When applied to the political dimension, these constructs represent an ideological definition, manifesting deep beliefs or positions within the power structure (Dubar, 2000).

Cabral recognised the risks of racialising Pan-Africanist principles. He declared that the struggle for national liberation was not against the Portuguese or white people. His pedagogical explanations emphasised the similarities between African clothing and traditions and those of other cultures throughout history. His primary concern was not to allow Pan-Africanism to be coloured by race but rather to define the national liberation struggle as a cultural factor, demonstrating the peoples' ability to reclaim their historical place. Thus, he was committed to a people-centric Pan-Africanism that unifies Africans of all hues and cultures,

the poor, disadvantaged, and marginalised, and eliminates the politicisation of ethnicity and the ethnicisation of politics. This toxic mix impedes interethnic and interstate cooperation.

Pan-Africanism and culture

According to Cabral, only through a sustained process of social and structural revolution, capable of actively engaging entire populations, could the necessary conditions be created for Africa to realise its potential. Many argue that most regions of Africa have yet to achieve these goals, mainly due to the absence of clear objectives and will, as defined by Cabral's conception of ideology. He viewed the lack of ideology as African elites' most widely shared characteristic. To counter this obstacle, Cabral invested significantly in analysing various forms of resistance.

Resistance emerged as the driving force that could spur Africa's transformation. This resistance could be political, economic, social, or cultural. Thus, the primary context of resistance practised by the national liberation movement was utilising the positive traits of the people's culture alongside similar traits from imported cultures. By providing direction, it was possible to inspire people to take control of their destiny, turning their intuitive cultural resistance into a transformative factor conducive to broader choices.

Cabral's other significant contributions to ideas include defining the factors underlying external domination, the concept of historical motivational force (which led Cabral to outline a theory challenging the central role of class struggle as a determining factor), the discussion on the suicide of the *petite bourgeoisie* after independence (which recognises the *petite bourgeoisie* as a crucial lever in African societies, essential for their transformation), and the idea that national liberation struggle is not only a product of culture but also a factor shaping culture.

Numerous books on African philosophy (Hallen, 2002) show Cabral's sophistication in linking culture and history. His contribution stands out for its originality in employing Marxist analytical categories, distinguishing him from Nkrumah and other leaders of the time. Cabral rejected labels and positioned himself without any inferiority complex, showcasing his refinement.

Frantz Fanon, a Caribbean-born Algerian, may be considered a comparable figure who greatly influenced Cabral. It appears that Cabral was highly influenced by Fanon, who played a crucial role in shaping the ideology of the FLN. At least three concepts extensively used by Cabral directly correlate with prior postulates developed by Fanon: the definition of unity, the absence of ideology in Africa, and the struggle for a place in history (Gordon, 1995).

Fanon was deeply concerned with understanding the reasons for disunity and contradictions within the struggle. Towards the end of his life, he became disenchanted with Nkrumah, as he believed that the African bourgeoisie in power viewed politics as a business venture, highlighting the absence of their ideology (Aid & Sherwood, 2003). Fanon also connected racism to an inability to see beyond the present, an imposition of hierarchy by the colonisers to solidify control and a weapon of ideological denial, rejecting and destroying the culture of the colonised (Macey, 2000).

Cabral revisited these ideas, making them fundamental to his explanation of the foundations of national liberation: the quest for a place in history, a supreme demonstration of a people's ability to validate their culture. Cabral asserts that "our peoples, regardless of their stage of economic development, have their own history" (Cabral, 1979).

These indirect dialogues between Fanon and Cabral's intellectual achievements have influenced the third generation of Pan-Africanists, although the debates on these topics remain unresolved. The same issues continue to be revisited with limited knowledge of the Pan-African narrative (Gibson, 2017; Gordon, 1995; Macey, 2000).

Pan-Africanism and the issue of identity

According to Claude Dubar, identity is not solely based on sameness but is the result of identification within a specific context. It is a combination of differentiation and generalisation. Differentiation refers to individuality about others, while generalisation pertains to commonalities within a whole.

The identity paradox lies in the fact that it is simultaneously unique and shared. Resolving this paradox requires considering the common element of differentiation and generalisation: identification from and for others (Dubar, 2000).

Identities vary depending on the context and history. As abstract human constructions, they represent snapshots of specific moments or periods. Applied to the Pan-Africanism debate, identity constructions based on territory or race can change with evolving realities. Identity is not static. The evolution of media and the reach of new technologies have strengthened plural identities. Nevertheless, Pan-Africanism offers a distinct perspective, acting as a political reference and anchor for the development demands rooted in regional integration.

In Europe, the European spirit or project is mentioned, while in Asia, Asian values are discussed. In the Arab world, the Arab Spring emerged as a contemporary form of identity valorisation.

Pan-Africanism predates all of these, possessing an enduring force. As Said suggests, this longevity can be partially attributed to "imaginative geography and history helping the mind intensify its sense of itself by dramatising distance and the difference between what is close to here and what is far" (Said, 2004). Pan-Africanism has evolved, influenced by its historical trajectory and its success as an ideology and an identity issue.

Amílcar Cabral and Mário de Andrade were concerned that identity would be used to trivialise the Pan-Africanist ideology, particularly in response to the totalitarian tendencies observed in the movements led by Sékou Touré, Nkrumah, and Kenyatta (Lopes, 2008).

Cabral and Andrade emphasised the importance of popular and direct democracy to protect these movements from such risks. Unfortunately, democracy was a weak response to the emerging powerful tendencies.

Cabral's famous call for the "petty bourgeoisie to commit suicide" can be interpreted as an indirect acknowledgement of the deviations within the nationalist movements or their misuse. It reflected an understanding that the historical process, a term frequently used in the 1960s, would take its course – a source of misfortune for both Pan-Africanism and their national projects.

In light of the AU's contemporary focus on economic integration and the African Renaissance, Cabral's ideas take on renewed significance. His recognition of the importance of culture, unity, and a revaluation of identity aligns with the AU's efforts to harness African cultural heritage, promote continental unity, and pursue inclusive economic development. By building upon the legacy of Cabral and other critical references of the Pan-African ideology, the AU seeks now to promote the idea of an African renaissance – a reinvigorated, prosperous, and culturally vibrant Africa that embraces its shared history, fosters unity, and realises the economic potential of the continent.

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